

Games coder Steve Howard discusses the real-first-proper Wipe Out Amiga title

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

The problem with intros is that you can only make them once. Welcome to part two of my Q&A sesh with Steve Howard, the one and only coder who worked on the Amiga's first Wipe Out game. An obscure title I attempted to put through its paces recently in preparation for my retrospective article on the subject. Without further ado, let's dive right in...



Q. How did your partnership with graphics artist, Paul Smith, come about?

Paul and myself were working for Richard Chappells at Soft Design. Paul came to me with the proposition that as we were only being paid a fraction of what Richard got for the work we did, we should go into business for ourselves and that's how Viz Design was born.



Q. You and Paul later set up Gonzo Games together before parting company to return to contract work. What happened there?

I left Gonzo Games in the middle of the Dracula thing, too many all-nighters (and getting shouted at in the morning because I hadn't finished) and no money amongst other things. Tried to get a proper job but found not having a degree (I have one now that I have never used) was a bit of a barrier so ended up back in games. One day I got a phone call at work along the lines of 'you owe us £50,000, what are you going to do about it?' Basically, debts run up with merchant banks while doing Gonzo Games. I made a deal, but I think Paul went on the run.



Q. That sounds like a nightmare. It always amazes me that deadlines are cut so tightly with developers made to work ridiculous hours to compensate rather than recruiting extra support. It's easy to see why timing is so critical with licensed movie games, but not so much with everything else. Back then a lot of games would have benefited from more time and polish even if it meant additional costs and a delayed ETA. Do you think any of these factors could have improved Wipe Out?

Regarding bigger teams, I think we *did* try to offer some work experience to a couple of uni students, but when they saw what was involved they ran away screaming. And I don't think we had the money for proper programmers. Also, 500k, although a big improvement over the 64k of previous computers was still quite limiting, and increasing team size is quite complicated especially as at the time there was no version control or networks and everything was done by swapping floppies so having more than one person working

on code is quite tricky. Apart from art and audio assets, it was quite hard to split tasks.

Sometimes I wonder how anyone can survive in the games industry. I have minimal overheads and have published quite a few games in the last few years, some with good reviews, but even with only a couple of people on a project (me coding, someone else on GFX, sound etc.) I am still earning way below minimum wage. I can't remember the last time I earned enough to pay tax, although I think this year I need to consider my position. How do these large teams make money, I think a lot of it is down to luck.

Although sometimes having to hit a deadline is contractual with penalties for missing it, the main problem we had at Gonzo was just trying not to run out of money with interest on loans, rent on offices and things. What you say is true though, the amount of games that I have worked on released before they are really ready is embarrassing.



It was our 1st game at Gonzo and at the time we didn't feel so strapped for cash, even if all the money we had was from a business loan. However, that did give us time to try and do

things properly, although as always, more time might have made it more polished.

The main reason Wipe Out didn't do well, despite all the relatively good publicity, was it was also our 1st go at self-publishing and we hadn't realised you actually have to talk to the shops, not just the distributors, or something like that. I remember piles of disks and boxes etc. in a corner and them not going anywhere. I even discreetly, directly sold to someone who was desperate for a copy of the game when they came around to our offices. We got it sussed for Street Hockey, but that, of course, wasn't a particularly good game.

BTW the (unusable) variable FOV was because I originally envisaged giving you a 360-degree view so you can see behind as well as in front at the same time, however, in practice, although it looked cool (my opinion), it was pretty confusing.

These days things like Steam are nice as it allows you to patch things after release, no such luxury in those days though. I, however, am still being forced to release games before they are ready. I've also been told to hold off on what I consider the main USP (after explaining how long it would take to implement) of a game and only add it if the game sells enough copies... which of course it won't as it needs that USP in order to sell. Sorry just needed to get that off my chest. :)



Q. What happened to Paul after you went your separate ways? He seems to have disappeared without a trace. I read on the Games That Weren't site that aside from (allegedly) cheating on his girlfriend, Paul (allegedly) did a runner with everyone's investments, which would likely explain why he wouldn't want to be found! (allegedly!)

I think the last contact I had with Paul was when he rang me up to ask if I still had an original Wipe Out game as he was thinking of suing the makers of WipeOut for stealing our game's name. That didn't go anywhere though as to have a case we'd have to have shown that having the same name would negatively impact us in some way. I'm also pretty sure Paul was also married before the girlfriend he cheated on.



Q. Despite the poor sales figures, it's nice to see that most of the critics recognised your efforts. Even the ones that referenced Tron and Worm realised there's a lot more to it than that. I noticed too that thirty years on some fans are pushing to get a WHDLoad version, but it's been suggested that bugs in the IPF may prevent this from happening any time soon. Do you think that's the case?

My Daughter commented last night that it is now as many years from 1990 as it is to 2050... I just noticed the copyright notice, scary. What's weird is that only 3 years later I had a 'proper' job and had created T2 Judgment Day (LJN) on SNES (another game with somewhat varied reviews and also rushed at the end).

I'm not sure about the buggy comments, at least on the side of the game. It *did* have quite a bit of testing so was pretty solid, not to say the odd bug may have crept through. Apart

from the disc loading I don't think I did anything dodgy with the hardware.



Q. Was the proprietary disk format, cryptic menu system and necessity to study the manual to work out how everything functions, partially an anti-piracy measure? Or was Wipe Out just overly complicated because you wanted to take Tron and step it up a gear?

The proprietary disk format was to try and reduce piracy which was starting to become a problem. It also helped speed up load time as it was basically just 1 sector per track. The game sort of treated the disk like virtual memory and I think it was hard-coded with the reverent disk locations to get the necessary data. It copied all the game data onto the league disk to save the swapping so maybe the hacked versions don't do that.

The cryptic menu was to save having to add and fit in lots of translated text in the game (these days I've had many a nicely designed menu messed up by the long text German needs). I also think the icons were meant to be meaningful, anyway, it seemed a good idea at the time.

Q. Wipe Out is pretty complex for an action-duelling Tron clone! It must have taken forever to engineer all the AI and mechanics. It might have been helpful if there was some kind of tutorial built-in to the game itself, or if a few lines of explanation popped up each time something new is attempted so there's not so much to digest all at once. Was something along these lines ever considered?

I don't think the thought of a tutorial even crossed our minds. I don't think many games at the time had them, and when you're immersed in a product for many months it's hard to put your mind in the frame of someone seeing it for the 1st time. I think had we been bigger and able to throw it to some game testers who hadn't grown up with the game we may have done some things differently.

Q. What I'm most curious about is the special manoeuvres described in the manual. Were you able to pull off all those back then? I'd love to see a YouTube video of someone showcasing the game who really knows how to get the best out of it.

They were all really just gameplay techniques taken from all the experience we had in testing. This game was played quite a lot before it was finally released. The actual gameplay mechanics were nailed down pretty early and adding the rest of the game, the boards, AI etc. was what really took the time.

Q. Did you get much feedback from the demo release? Would there have been time to implement any recommendations

based on that? This would have been an ideal opportunity to have it put through its paces for free by thousands of people, as long as it was delivered early enough.

I think by the time the demo came out the game was pretty much in production. It's possible the demo was produced after the game was sort of released, although I can't be fully sure of the timeline. That aside, I don't think we got any negative feedback on the demo.

Q. I've played the IPF version and couldn't really get too far into the league game. I don't know if it's an emulator issue, but everything seems very unresponsive and unpredictable. It wouldn't run on anything other than a bog-standard A500 with half a meg of memory so I couldn't give it a boost that way. I forgot to experiment with the floppy disk acceleration trick. How well did it run on genuine hardware? Do you think the badly cracked version would have encouraged sales of the genuine article or skewed customers' opinion of it?

Sorry to hear about the problems you had with the IPF, that's a shame, wonder if anyone had better luck with the ST version.

Wipe Out, the ST version was written before the Amiga one. Not sure if ST came out 1st, but it was the 1st of those two I got my hands on. Shame the ST is behind the Amiga on the emulator side of things, I suppose in the end the Amiga won the battle of games machine with ST mostly used because of its midi support. I think I still have an Atari in my Dad's loft, unless it has been thrown out by now.



I'm not sure about the responsiveness. It probably only ran at something like 10 fps, but at the time it was definitely playable. I think I still have the tatty remains of a Zero Hero t-shirt I got when we were awarded that by Zero magazine. Paul took a copy of the game to a number of magazines and played it with them, which I think helped with the reviews. I think one magazine even had an internal league with this game. BTW if you end up in the same star system as another player you can play them head to head.

And yes, to improve sales what you want is a hack that works well for long enough to attract a customer but short enough to leave them wanting more.

Q. Have you ever considered working on a remake? It would be great if Wipe Out got a new lease of life and you had chance to correct any issues that prevent people from enjoying it.

I have the urge to try and maybe do an update of it now, if I can find the spare time, but this year is the 30th anniversary of the original coming out, so would probably be a good time to do it.

A dual analogue controller might even make it more controllable. The thing I have to consider is that when I wrote it there was no hardware 3D rendering support and the way it was written doesn't translate well to the way renderers project a 3D scene onto a 2D monitor. However, I think I'd like it to be faithful to the way it did it... hmm.

Q. Yes, I think if you did a remake it would have to remain true to the original, otherwise it could just be any contemporary game employing modern techniques. Your Wipe Out stood out at the time for doing something different with an ancient concept so you'd need to tap into that particular USP.

One thing that would be a big improvement is to use the full playfield for each competitor so the cramp split screen could be retired. Other than that, recreating the game people expected from reading those favourable reviews should be enough. How do you imagine you would tackle the multiplayer presentation today?

I think at the time split-screen helped due to the squarer TVs/monitors as due to the nature of the game, having a wide horizontal aspect ratio helped. I may retain the option for split-screen local play even though everyone is now 19:9. We shall see.



Thanks again for your time. It's been a fun ride to explore Wipe Out even though I didn't manage to get the best out of

it for technical reasons. Regardless, I can appreciate your ambition to enhance the basic arcade principles with SWOS style management elements to distance the game from the likes of Tron and Worm as much as possible. This added depth clearly went down well with many of the critics who otherwise might have just accused you of making Tron 3D. I noticed some did that anyway and loved it irrespective of its roots. They were won over by the thrill of the head to head two-player action and any other considerations paled into insignificance.